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An American odyssey of suffering: aesthetic strategies in Steve McQueen's '12 Years a Slave'

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Scott Loren

An American Odyssey of Suffering: Aesthetic Strategies in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*¹

Abstract: In her seminal study on racial melodrama, Linda Williams suggested that “variations of the melodrama of black and white continue to be necessary to the way mass American culture ‘talks to itself’ about race” (2001: 301), with cinema as a means for cultures to reflect on unresolved social tensions through fictional forms. Williams’s choice of phraseology is reflexive of the theory informing her book: melodrama, a protean meta-genre and cultural mode, mobilizes cinematic aesthetic hyperbole and filmic realism, seeking to make an unspeakable moral order “legible”; a “mute text” used to conjure occult knowledge.² Configured around signs of virtue and villainy through racial difference, racial melodrama’s Manichaeism of good and evil allows for intense, emotive

1 The title makes reference to Thomas Elsaesser’s 1972 essay “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama”, where he addresses the “radical ambiguity” of film melodrama: “Depending on whether the emphasis fell on the odyssey of suffering or the happy ending [...] melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism – categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context” (qtd. in Landy 1972: 72). Beyond the general topical reference to melodrama, Elsaesser’s text helps to position my approach to *12 Years a Slave* in two particular ways. First, the ambiguity in which melodrama can become subversive is also central to my reading of McQueen’s film. Through an interpretive lens of melodrama, the film is in some ways conventional and in others quite unconventional. Next, the emphasis Elsaesser gives to the aesthetics of melodrama as a “system of punctuation” (Landy 1972: 74) is significant here as it is in the film’s aesthetic strategies that *12 Years a Slave* negotiates the terrain between melodramatic convention and subversion. Though Williams has provided to date the most prominent study of racial melodrama, her theory focuses more on narrative elements such as Manichaeism and morality, where throughout his career Elsaesser has put emphasis on aesthetic components of melodrama. In “Tales of Sound and Fury”, he describes the melodramatic aesthetic as a “system of punctuation, giving expressive color and chromatic contrast to the story-line, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue. The advantage of this approach is that it formulates the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation” (Landy 1972: 74).

2 This concept is established in Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976). See Williams 315, endnote 17 for her use of the terms “moral occult” and “moral legibility”.

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cinematic identification, capable of reconciling “the irreconcilables of American culture” (Williams 2001: 299). Hailed as the most important cinematic event in years, the critical success of Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013) seems to attest to the continuing legitimacy of Williams’s claims.³ This paper positions *12 Years a Slave* in a melodramatic thematics of race. Examining the narrative and aesthetic strategies of McQueen’s adaptation alongside generic conventions, it considers the ways in which the film, as a racial melodrama, negotiates ambivalences and contingencies of historic national trauma through a narrative of Manichaeian moral legibility.

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Slavery is like the elephant in the room, and what you do is sprinkle flour over it and make it visible. *Steve McQueen*⁴

I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly. *Teju Cole*⁵

Made in an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., Steve McQueen’s comment on slavery produces an uncannily polyvalent visual metaphor of racial melodrama. On the one hand, through the simile of the elephant in the room, the topics of slavery and race are addressed as traumatically mute non-discourses around historic guilt: slavery as a melodramatic mute text.⁶ On the other hand, in the sprinkling of flour onto the physical mass of the elephant’s body, one might find parallels not only to melodrama as a set of generic conventions seeking to make the unspeakable legible through non-verbal aesthetic means, but also to a resonance of rich visual and historic associations: the elephant as an animal native to Africa, exported largely for commercial purposes, the dark hues of its skin under the white of the flour, it has no voice, no visibility (Mirzoeff 2006)⁷ – a living, feeling and thinking physical presence turned into an object. Already here McQu-

³ See, for example, the *The Guardian* reviews and the list of accolades at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/movie/156376/12-years-a-slave> [accessed 13 February 2014]. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/awards>> [accessed 10 February 2014].

⁴ Interview with Henry Louise Gates Jr. (2013), who also worked as historical consultant to the film.

⁵ *The Atlantic*. 21 March 2012. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>> [accessed 10 February 2014].

⁶ Brooks referred to melodrama as a ‘text of muteness’, suggesting that where words were impractical – for example, due to legal restraints regarding public stage drama, or due to the difficulty in verbally expressing particular subject matter – melodrama adopted a hyperbolic gestural style “to make available the expression of pure moral and psychological integers” or of “ethical conflict and manichaeistic struggle” (1995: 56).

een's sensibilities as a visual artist become evident. Careful in its negotiation of viewer sentiment, cautious in its proximity to Hollywood sentimentality, *12 Years a Slave* mobilizes conventions of melodrama without becoming conventional.

At the close of his autobiographical account of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, Solomon Northup writes: "This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture. I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana" (2013: 217). McQueen reiterates Northup's reflections in a series of title cards following the closing sequence where Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is reunited with his family. Ending on a moral note may be in accord with generic conventions of melodrama. Less conventional, however, is the prioritization of unresolved historical trauma over sentimentalized resolution that characterizes the film's ending. In the space and medium for generating what Thomas Elsaesser (2009) has referred to as the affective *Erlebnis* of sensory and emotive shock and contemplative, introspective *Erfahrung*, the film's ending is careful to reposition viewers in a state of *Erfahrung*, casting a shadow over the emotive, affective and cathartic *Erlebnis* of a genre-typical family scene. The dramatic staging of a happy ending is, in fact, not the diegetic end of the film, which is moralizing as opposed to morally reassuring.

Asked why he chose not to end with the emotive intensity of a reunion scene, McQueen replied: "Because the story goes on. And the thought I wanted them to leave with was what happened to Patsy and all the other millions of slaves" (Gates Jr. 2013). After staging the melodramatic generic trope of a return to the space of familial innocence, implicitly signaling redemption and engendering relief within the imaginary complex of national historical guilt, the film points to the exceptionality of Northup's biography; its fictitiousness if you will. However, the epilogue also mythologizes Northup as a historical hero, informing viewers of his role in the abolitionist movement and his connections to the

7 With the pairing of voice and visuality here, Mirzoeff's notion of visuality might be described in relation to Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Where with Spivak the question of what hegemonic discourse allows to be said about and in the name of an 'other' – i. e. individuals external or liminal in relation to hegemonic power, but importantly individuals as objects of discourse without access to discourse – is one language, with Mirzoeff the visual and the specular take the place of language. Thus, with a shift from the linguistic turn to the visual turn, the question of who has access to the power of language and how hegemonic discourse objectifies 'others' becomes a question of who has access to the power of vision: Who can see? Who can be seen? What are the effects of hegemonic "scopic regimes" (cf. in particular Mirzoeff: 54–55 and 64–66)?

Underground Railroad. This quick switch between three possible cinematic story-telling conventions – a melodramatic return to the space of familial innocence, the characteristically counter-cinema gesture of a film pointing toward its own artifice (i. e. the happy end as cinematic convention), and an implicit staging of the hero myth – forced a clearer articulation of a question that had distracted me throughout the film: how does McQueen’s adaptation correspond to what Linda Williams has referred to as America’s “melodramatic racial fix” (2001: 296–310)? Williams defines the racial fix as a cultural means of addressing the vicissitudes of historic guilt around racial tensions through an “interplay of the stereotypes of racially constituted good and evil” (2001: 297). Depiction of these and negotiations of emotion regarding guilt and moral rectitude are enacted most prominently within the generic conventions of melodrama. From a critical perspective conscientious in mapping generic convention onto a historical biopic, I would begin under the assumption that filmic storytelling necessarily works through the aesthetic narrative means at its disposal and within or in reference to generic convention, which is admittedly not a static structure of reference.⁸

As Derrida suggests in “The Law of Genre”, texts are not discretely situated in one or another genre, but are marked by generic conventions to greater and lesser degrees and thus inscribed in one or more genres.⁹ Prioritizing generic indexes in *12 Years a Slave*, one might ask: is it primarily a melodrama or a history film? If a melodrama, where is the stress: on race, on family, on gender, on institutionalized social inequity? If a history film, is it a biopic, a testimonial, a historical dramatization? There seemed no reason to doubt that, as a history film, *12 Years a Slave* “consciously tries to recreate the past” through cinematic aesthetics and reality effects that “shape historical consciousness” in the present.¹⁰ *12 Years a Slave* is a film *about* film and cultural memory; a conscientious re-collection and re-presentation of ‘viscourses’ that reframe the past in contemporary contexts (Loren and Metelmann 2013: 11, 13, 45). The question of its correlation to the American melodramatic racial fix and to the cinematic representation of slavery in American history is then also a question of how the film presents the past in culturally, historically and medium specific ways.

⁸ See for example Derrida (1980) on genre, and Bordwell (1985), Carroll (1985) on media specificity and narrative film.

⁹ Derrida 1980: 55–81. See also Natalie Zemon Davis on genre, history films and slavery. In *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, she takes the example of *Beloved* as an adaptation, period film, horror film, coming of age film (2002: 121).

¹⁰ Westwell 2007: 587. See also Rosenstone 2006: 3.

Published in 1854, the textual source of McQueen's adaptation is the autobiographical memoir *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, citizen of New-York, kidnapped in Washington city in 1841, and rescued in 1853, from a plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana*. The book was written for publication by New York lawyer David Wilson (Taylor 1999: 160). With 30,000 copies in circulation, it was considered a best seller, providing first hand, biographical evidence for experiences of slavery that had been fictionalized in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* two years earlier. Stowe, to whom Northup's book was dedicated, subsequently integrated Northup's story in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, seeing in it "striking parallels" (Taylor 1999: 160) between Northup's own experience and her depiction of slavery in the same region, at the same time. Frederick Douglass, whose autobiographical account of slavery was published in 1845 (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*), wrote of *Twelve Years a Slave*: "Its truth is stranger than fiction [...] For thirty years a *man*, with all a man's hopes, fears and aspirations – with a wife and children [...] then for twelve years a *thing*, a chattel personal, classed with mules and horses" ([1853] Horton 1997: 256). Despite its historical importance and initial success, Northup's memoir fell into relative obscurity until 1968, when it was republished and subsequently adapted for television. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* was televised in 1984 by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).¹¹ As part of PBS's *American Playhouse* series, the production was broadcast to a nationwide audience. However, PBS's production was unable to achieve recognition and bring notoriety to the original source on the scale McQueen's film has. They are, of course, different cultural artifacts with divergent historical contexts. McQueen is acutely aware of his film's (and its success's) specificity as a cultural artifact when he states that "[o]ne cannot underestimate the influence that President Barack Obama has had on all these recent films on African-American life. [...] [P]reviously, people wanted to make these stories, but maybe now they thought they had the authority to" (Gates Jr. 2013).

According to McQueen, he had the idea for the film without previously having heard of the book: "I wanted to tell a story about slavery [...] I had the idea of a free man kidnapped into bondage" and envisioned "a main character any viewer could identify with" (McQueen 2013: xiii). His partner, Bianca Stigter, brought Northup's biography to McQueen's attention (McQueen 2013: xiii).

¹¹ PBS is a non-profit, national televisual broadcast. The *American Playhouse* series enjoyed popular and critical success during its 11-year run between 1982 and 1991. See the national Endowment for the Humanities site: <<http://www.neh.gov/films/twelve-years-slave-solomon-northups-odyssey>> [accessed 14 February 2014].

With elements of adventure, horror, humanity, and its epic range, the book's cinematic qualities were convincing and promised to translate well as a historical film drama with mass appeal. According to Robert Rosenstone, mainstream history films seek reality effects through aesthetic strategies of photo-realism, a perspective-bound narrative register in the present tense and meticulous surface detail. They tend to focus on individuals or small groups, privilege emotion, and have a "strong moral flavor" (Westwell 2007: 584 and Rosenstone 2006: 15–17). If, as Rosenstone argues, mainstream history cinema seeks to achieve a tone of authenticity by framing history in a politically progressive fashion that wants to make a lasting impact on its viewers, the prescribed set of possibilities the medium has to offer – technically, aesthetically and narratively – are also not singular. Rosenstone's indexes for the history film facilely overlap with those of melodrama, which in the first instance hyperbolically mobilizes cinema's aesthetic possibilities to achieve an immersive, affective viewing experience whose primary narrative function is to anchor moral identification with the force of emotive conviction.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks (1976) maps a history of ideational tropes and narrative modes wherein melodrama succeeds tragedy in the aftermath of the French Revolution, becoming the dominant dramatic form of story-telling that accompanies the burgeoning social technologies of modernity. As in Western Europe, the unique convergence of historical contingencies in America are favorable to the rise melodrama as a dramatic form particularly attuned to, or generated as a result of, the demands of modern modes of social organization. Profoundly interdependent and characterized by distinctions of class, race, and gender, the formative social paradigms of proto-democratic participatory government and capital labor in the United States would rapidly determine the new nation's hegemonic structures of power. As in Brooks's contextualization of melodrama in the historic processes of modernity, the significance of Williams's argument when drawing attention to the bind between race and melodrama in American cultural practices and perceptions becomes manifest in this historical context. While the institution of slavery provided the material foundations for America's development into a powerful capitalist nation (Post 2012), melodrama – a conceptual cultural artifact, a means for culture to 'talk to itself' – has provided a mode to address the social inequities symptomatically engendered through the hegemony of proto-democratic Capital in America.

For Williams, racial melodrama is more than a means of dramatizing cultural history: it is itself a cultural history, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with the dramatic production of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While Stowe's sentimental depiction of slavery in America played an important role in the public

promotion of abolitionism prior to the civil war, an essential element in its ability to have done so, according to Williams, was the juxtaposition of institutionalized social inequity vis-à-vis the humanity and suffering of slaves; through the Christ-like character of Tom in particular (Williams 2001: 45–95). The impact of Stowe's novel was such that it mainstreamed the political, ideological, economic and regionally distinct topic of slavery into a popular melodrama capable of polarizing views and positions of identification into morally legible positions of good and evil that had real consequences for public opinion and political action. Stowe's foundational racial melodrama also produced character clichés with such staying power that they still persist. Finding examples in a broad range of fiction and non-fiction, Williams draws on clichés around the figure of Tom as symbolically embodying “negrophilia” in the national imaginary, setting *Tom sentiment* against *anti-Tom* “negrophobia” archetypally established in the cinema with Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (Williams 2001: 98–135). Between these particularly American melodramatic archetypes of virtuous suffering and villainous animal brutality, Williams proceeds to illustrate how melodrama has become “the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans” (Williams 2001: 44).

In its thematic attributes of story, plot, character and action, in its aesthetic strategies, and in its call to address slavery as historic event and national trauma, many elements of *12 Years a Slave* can be contextualized by the melodramatic mode and the American racial fix. Combining tropes from family and racial melodrama, the film presents the story of an innocent and virtuous man who is a victim not merely of coincidence, having been in the wrong place at wrong time, but of institutional social injustice: the South is portrayed as a world where virtue has become obscured and occulted. Threat to the space of familial innocence and the hope of a return create tension and drive the narrative forward along a temporal axis. Institutionalized racism takes priority among social evils, though discourses on class and gender are also present. The film not only mobilizes realism to add legitimacy to the moral registers it sounds; it exceeds the legitimacy of cinematic realism with biographical claims to authenticity. In addition to the central role of the suffering, virtuous victim, there are stock villains, shocking reversals of fortune, and an aesthetic style that “punctuates” the story (Elsaesser 1972). The mute text of physical anguish, spiritual suffering, emotional distress, humiliation and confusion provide for moral legibility in a manner highly emotive and affective.

The film is also unambiguous in its production of *Tom* and *anti-Tom* sentiment, focusing its Tom lens through sympathy with suffering victims and antipathy toward morally corrupt figures. Northup is portrayed as a civilized, bene-

volent man whose moral integrity is pronounced through narratological functions of character development and through a spectacle of suffering. Spectacle and aesthetic play a typically key role in developing subordinate characters as well, as they require more efficient, temporally compact coding. The scene of Northup's sale into slavery is exemplary in its mobilization of melodramatic aesthetic composition, where room interiors and object surfaces concomitantly set the mood but also provide for Manichaean moral legibility.

Having been kidnapped, Northup arrives at the home of Theophilus Freeman (Paul Giamatti), where he and other slaves are put on display for auction. The camera follows the slave trader Freeman as he moves through rooms commenting on his goods. Like Freeman's dress, the room interiors are elaborately decorated with objects signifying bourgeois material wealth, while on-screen music emanates from somewhere in the house. The half-naked bodies of slaves populate the rooms. In the mise-en-scene's aesthetic composition, a density of dark-skinned body surfaces set into sharp contrast the incongruity of their own status as objects of possession signifying wealth. The music, the ornate décor, Freeman's frenetic movement through the rooms and his rough physical treatment of the slaves, shaking and slapping their limbs in an exhibition of their physical qualities, conjoin to make the atmosphere increasingly claustrophobic while establishing a rhetoric of Manichaean moral legibility: white bourgeois villainy and black virtuous victimhood. Moral legibility is increased through aesthetic hyperbole when Freeman separates a mother from her two children. Her convulsive wailing juxtaposed to Freeman's demands to keep the music playing as he negotiates her children's material value with a potential buyer intensifies Manichaean coding in the scene while also mirroring Northup's separation from his own family. With such scenes, the film articulates a melodramatic rhetoric of emphatic "simple truths and relationships" where, as Brooks and Williams have stressed, characters are invested with primary psychic roles (Brooks 1995: 13).

As a slavery biopic, McQueen's film unsurprisingly centralizes the trope of the suffering body. Though its aesthetic punctuation and narrative strategies serve Manichaean moral legibility, it is also here that *12 Years a Slave* is less conventionally melodramatic. For each portrayal of Manichaean metaphysical truth, a narrative twist is introduced that destabilizes a discourse of ahistorical Manichaean certitude. Take, for example, the brief encounter between Northup and Samuel Bass (played by co-producer Brad Pitt), a migrant Canadian abolitionist who helps Northup recover his freedom. At this point in the story, Northup has been sold to the plantation owner Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). Epps hires Bass as a free white man seeking temporary work. In a scene where Bass and Northup are building a gazebo against the backdrop of the Epps

home, Bass expresses a moral philosophy in which good men do good deeds and evil men do evil deeds, and that the qualifiers of good and evil are not subject to the contingency of a particular situation: people and the deeds they do are anchored in metaphysical, Manichaeic moral truths. Bass is so moved by the injustice of Northup's suffering that he agrees to help, whatever dangers might befall him, if it will restore justice and rejoin Northup with his family.

The simple expression of Bass's moral conviction, the constellation of pathos and action set in play, the temporal compression of the scene, and the extra-diegetic association of Pitt as a male hero character actor all contribute to an atmosphere of melodramatic hyperbole, with characters flattened into patterns of primary psychic roles: the victim as virtuous sufferer beset by social injustice and the altruistic hero courageously risking life and limb. While explaining his incredible change of fortune, and thus exposing the hidden truth of his identity, Northup draws the suspicion first of an overseer and then of Epps. Consequently, he is forbidden to speak about anything but the physical task at hand. As if to turn melodramatic convention into an avant-garde, self-reflexive staging of artifice, the scene closes with a literalized performance of the moral occult: melodrama as a mute text that articulates moral legibility is mirrored in Epps's demand for muteness at the very moment Northup articulates the hidden truth of his identity. The scene is encapsulated by cine-aesthetic and narrative framing devices – change in setting, action, character constellation, and primary subject matter, along with a jump cut that marks a shift in time – with the potential result of establishing a *mise-en-abyme* of melodramatic Manichaeism. However, its conspicuous framing also brings the scene into dialogue with other sequences that present a counter logic.

This juxtaposition dislodges the Bass-Northup scene as a frame story seeking to establish metaphysical truth claims of moral Manichaeism as a dominant concept informing the filmic narrative. Interestingly, the film's potential logic of moral Manichaeism is not undercut in relation to a subordinate character, like Bass, who in fact *makes* the argument for moral Manichaeism, but in relation to those occupying the generic roles of victim and villain: Northup and Epps.

After his kidnapping, Northup is first sold to William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), laboring for him under the authority of the overseer John Tibeats (Paul Dano). Northup impresses Ford with his intelligence and ingenuity, which has the concomitant effect of offending the dull-witted, sadistic Tibeats, who sees him as a threat. Additionally, winning Ford's favor sets Northup apart from the other slaves. A well-placed accusation that he is desirous of Ford's approval briefly puts Northup in the awkward 'Tom' position of a slave who takes pleasure in serving his white master. Quick to preclude masochistic pleasure or moral corruption, Northup replies that Ford is a good man, given the circumstances.

His response sidesteps conventions of melodramatic moral Manichaeism. With this move, the centrality of metaphysical truth claims regarding good and evil are undermined not so much by disrupting the association between corrupt social institutions and morally corrupt individuals (i. e. you can be a slave owner and still have moral integrity) as by redirecting categories for character traits and actions away from Hollywood's mythic dimensions of good and evil, and toward situated cultural practices and historical, social contingency. Northup's claim signals his ability to perceive the wild absurdity of his own situation (i. e. that there is no 'deeper' metaphysical meaning behind it), but also expresses a more fundamental worldview that displaces conventions of moral Manichaeism. Northup's statement allows for a more secularized rationale of contingency that encompasses not only his chance misfortune of a life in servitude, but also Ford's chance fortune of a life as a free white landowner in the American antebellum South. Victimhood, villainy and the moral occult thus lose some of their mythic quality as focus is shifted toward the notions of contingency and historical specificity.

Other meaningful departures from the conventions of melodrama are similarly staged around the moral occult and a metaphysical epistemology of good and evil; particularly through the character of Epps and his deliberate use of biblical rhetoric. Once Epps's cruelty and physical brutality is established – through his sexual abuse of Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) and his enthusiastic support of beatings – there is a close-up in which he dismisses the notion of good and evil in relation to his actions: there is no good and evil, he claims. His slaves are his possession, and he will do as he chooses with them. Epps is thus portrayed as a completely secularized materialist. As opposed to flattening him into a mono-dimensional bad guy (or into the monomyth of good and evil), the claim acts as a logical support for his behavior. As a character with depth, he is imbued with physical and psychical drives of which he is conscious and consciously indulges in.

Epps's pragmatic use of religious rhetoric to satisfy his own needs can be seen in another close-up shot when it occurs to him that he might attribute poor crop conditions to his slaves' sins. Looking over a field of diseased cotton plants and considering his financial losses, the camera moves in for a headshot of Epps. Fassbender's facial gesture shifts from a suggestion of angry frustration to one of inspiration as he utters to himself, "A plague". He begins to fabricate the story he will tell the slave trader Freeman: that the slaves he was sold have brought a blight on his crops, that he will return the slaves until they have been spiritually cleansed, and that he will deduct his losses for that season from the debt he owes on his purchase of the slaves. These negotiations are subsequently portrayed in a compact visual sequence that receives comparatively little screen

time. It is significant that Epps's formulation of the idea privately to himself and to the viewer takes precedence over the actual negotiations that follow. Through the filmic storytelling aesthetic, McQueen stages Epps staging a biblical metaphysics of good and evil as a strategy for dealing with an economic problem.

Epps is developed as a character driven by animal desires, but he is no Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter* [1955]), preaching good and doing evil with the conviction of some hidden deeper, metaphysical truth. Epps is staged as a shrewd businessman, a pragmatist whose doxastic logic as *a conscious mode of manipulation* might find a suitable ideational context in both Arendt's philosophy of banal evil and in melodrama's moral occult. Epps and Freeman occupy character roles of villainy that represent a 'bad' social ontology in which humans are traded as capital goods. As opposed to sentimentalizing slavery through a focused discourse of good and evil – which might also include portraying a colonialist-like justification for the treatment of slaves through the notion of spiritual superiority and inferiority – doxastic logic and religious rhetoric are staged as capitalist resources.¹² The shift from a sentimentalized quasi-spiritual logic lurking behind representations of social inequities and inhumanity toward a more radically secularized phenomenological representation of historic events can be attributed to the film's own historical and cultural specificity: here, epistemological paradigms of the natural and social sciences and the hegemony of capital have thoroughly displaced less secular modes of knowledge and sense making. Such a perspective finds support in the film's aesthetic strategies as well, where suggestions of a metaphysical universe and the moral occult are undercut through scenic compositions depicting varied aspects of the material world.

In the film's picture language – its spatial and temporal arrangement of images – one has a distinct impression that the viewer's attention is directed toward the materiality of objects as much as to a moral occult that seeks legibility. I am thinking in particular of the prominence of the natural setting in McQueen's mise-en-scene. The beauty of nature in the southern states and the horrors of slavery are set in contrast to one another. There are various inquiries one might make based on this premise: for example the question of how social atrocities like slavery can exist within surroundings of sublime, natural beauty; and subsequently how, given this context, is one to make sense of a natural order of things on the one hand and social progression on the other. McQueen noted in this regard: "People have said to me 'It's so beautiful', and that's because it is

¹² Where epistemic logic addresses knowledge, doxastic logic refers to belief.

so beautiful. Horrific things happen in beautiful places. I can't put a filter on life. Life is perverse" (Gates Jr. 2013). One might also approach the incompatibilities between nature (via natural beauty) and the human (via social atrocity) differently.

The majority of Northup's story as represented in images – i. e. the filmic discourse time, not the story time – takes place in the South on or near the Epps plantation. Throughout this segment of the film, McQueen gives a conspicuous amount of screen time to still shots of nature. In its aesthetic composition, the film directs the viewer's gaze towards the visual relationship between the natural setting and the characters that at times populate it. Its most striking means of doing so is through continuity shots, such as the match cut, used at key moments in story development. For example, once Northup has arrived at the Epps plantation, the viewer is introduced to novel characters and elements of setting, but to provide and intensify the context of Northup as slave on a plantation, McQueen uses an arresting match cut: a *mise-en-scène* of willow trees covered in Spanish moss is replaced by a mid-range full body shot of a group of slaves standing directly in front of a corn field. Continuity in the match cut is established through the spatial composition of objects in the frame: the vertical lines of the trees and foliage are not centralized in any one part of the frame, but are spread across the entire frame, and are replaced by the shot of slaves standing immobile in the natural setting. Their stature, the folds in their clothes, and their positioning in a group next to one another that nearly fills the frame all aesthetically resonate with the preceding shot of willows. As if to underline the visual association between the natural settings and the slaves *as* physical presence, the second shot is characterized by color continuity within the frame where the foreground of brown bodies clothed in light earth-tones becomes uncanny against the background of tall tan and green corn stalks. This elicits an association to slaves bound to the land through labor; but the shot also visually equates human bodies and plant bodies as objects of natural growth within the rural landscape.

McQueen's sensibilities as a visual artist are evident in the poetic density and tenacity of such compositions. The aggregate images are at once beautiful in aesthetic and disturbing in suggestion. If they can be viewed as reflections on incongruities of natural beauty and social atrocities, they indeed achieve a kind of reflexive performativity. Doubtless, *12 Years a Slave* employs the mute text of melodramatic aesthetic punctuation to achieve moral legibility through Manichaean polarization. Recall, for example, the brutal gesticulations of Freeman contrasted against the bourgeois trappings of his home and the static helplessness of the people in it being sold into slavery. Though the filmic language serves this narrative element throughout, it is not limited to aesthetic hyperbole

in the service of moral legibility. The continuity shots connecting rural nature and the physical presence of laboring slaves carefully repeated in the film's pictorial language draw attention elsewhere. As opposed to Manichaeian clarity where the field of the visual is hyperbolically 'loaded' to create tension between polarities, the visual field here is 'overloaded' in a sublime compression of signifiers and possible meaning (Weiskel 1976).

Compressing a range of latent meaning thus resists the dialectical negotiation of a moral universe, pointing rather to an aporia in representation/meaning attached to the historical national trauma of slavery. That is to say, where conventions of racial melodrama might seek to (emotionally) resolve the (traumatic) irresolvable through the possibility of sentimental identification with a suffering victim, reassuring the viewer in his or her moral convictions – this is also at stake in *12 Years a Slave* – the paradoxical incongruity in McQueen's continuity shots overlays a punctuated visual field of moral legibility with an uncanny aesthetic composition of the inscrutable sublime.

At once underlining the affective power of this incongruity and compressing its suggestive language to a still greater density, McQueen repeats the content and form of the bodies-in-nature continuity shots, particularly the willows and slaves match cut, by aesthetically compressing them into a single inevitable frame: Solomon Northup's lynching. This frame of incongruity resonates throughout the film's picture language as it does throughout the cultural visual memory of racial hate and historical trauma in America. The aesthetic continuity linking agrarian natural beauty with the material (historical) presence of social atrocity shifts from an implicit commentary on the incongruity of beauty and horror inhabiting the same time-space in history, to one of incongruity between two related aesthetic experiences of the sublime. The result is an affect image that phenomenologically generates a Kantian sublime of self-forgetfulness when confronted with an overwhelming aesthetic presence (McCloskey 1987: 94–101), and a Lacanian sublime in which the semantic field becomes 'mute' or jammed as an object vacates the place of representation and enters the non-place of the *das Ding* (Lacan 1992: 110–113). What can be seen in the frame is no longer an opposition between society or culture (atrocity) and nature (beauty), but bodies in nature that appear to be beyond sense-making.

With the collapse of nature and culture in the match cut and the mise-en-scene of Northup's hanging, is there not a suggestion of congruity between indifference in the natural order of things, on the one hand, and social order that turns humans into things on the other? This is the film's proper mise-en-abyme; its diegetic framing of the story in an aesthetically condensed form. It suggests the history of slavery in America is a national trauma that invariably exceeds representation while at the same time necessitating it. If the moral occult be-

comes legible here, it does so not by ascribing to the misadventures of history a deeper level of metaphysical meaning, but by portraying evil in its most banal and thus all the more disturbing form: as a corruptive agent that thrives in social ecosystems the way disease thrives in cotton fields, given the proper conditions. This is not mythic evil, a plague sent to blight the material world, but a quotidian evil of material practices in the material world.

How, then, does *12 Years a Slave* correspond to the American melodramatic racial fix and to conventions of melodrama? According to McQueen, what is at stake in this film may not be a resolution of the historically irresolvable through sentimental identification. The film does not caress the viewer's sense of guilt through moral identification. McQueen describes it, rather, as a "call to arms" seeking to promote real action: "There's so much that we can do and should do" (Gates Jr. 2013). There are symbolic and material reparations that might be made, but there are also ongoing social and material practices that might be more radically scrutinized. Replacing emotional resolution with a call to action does not necessarily make the film less melodramatic; though perhaps it becomes less typical of the melodramatic racial fix as Williams articulated it. Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that contemporary trauma theory and melodrama have similar social functions. Each serve "as a placeholder for a politics either no longer or not yet possible" (2014: 318). In its dramatization of the suffering body, its hyperbolic aesthetic of object surfaces, and its attention to material practices, what kind of politics might the film be pointing toward? *12 Years a Slave* articulates the trope of the suffering body through a depiction of the body as capital good, but also the body as object in nature. By doing so, it constructs a parallel pairing: body-and-capital is doubled by the pair nature-and-capital. This is not only a 'moral' story of material sins and capital gains – i. e. the story of slavery as an irresolvable historical trauma. It is also a material history of capital and society that might seek resonance in contemporary material practices and the social technologies that enable them.

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